

Color, 3-D bills might pay for foiling copycats

By Roger Boye

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United States currency likely will get a facelift later this decade as Uncle Sam tries to outwit counterfeiters using a new generation of copying machines.

Top-level bureaucrats are scrutinizing proposals, such as adding color or a three-dimensional optical device to "folding money." But the portraits of George Washington and other famous Americans should survive unscathed.

"We [plan to] maintain the current design architecture, including green backs and black fronts," said Robert J. Leuver, director of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. "That leaves us with the white space between the portrait and border design [to make changes]."

Leuver's staff prints all U.S. paper money—6 billion pieces a year, worth about \$60 billion—as well as postage stamps. Newly designed bills would begin circulating about one year after Treasury Secretary Donald T. Regan approves the change, although that approval may not come for many more months. [Treasury personnel have yet to give Regan a "final proposal" to consider, Leuver said.]

If government printers add color to the front-side "white space," they likely would use subtle tones in different shades, Leuver said. Bright colors would be shunned because copying machines reproduce them with relative ease.

Experts also are evaluating optical devices of two or three dimensions that would change appearance when viewed from different angles, and thus would be almost impossible to duplicate on a copying machine.

In addition, Leuver and his colleagues are studying the use of reflective inks and paper bearing special security threads or watermarks, among other things. Of course, the final product could incorporate two or more changes.

"We'll never eliminate counterfeiting," Leuver said in late May while attending a postage stamp show in suburban Rosemont. "We just want to get rid of the casual counterfeiter so that we can work on the professional."

Leuver added that the Treasury Department would not on its own demonetize "old currency" after it introduced redesigned bills in an attempt to flush out money from the underground economy. To conduct a "currency recall," the government would have to print quickly as many as 20 billion bills—about three times a normal year's quota—a feat Leuver labeled physically impossible.

Meanwhile, the bureau may begin producing currency with a universal Federal Reserve seal within the next two years. Now printers use a different seal on bills made for each of the 12 Federal Reserve districts, an inefficient and costly operation.